Class Notes #4: Easter-Pentecost

**Resurrection and the Spirit of the Risen Christ**

* Required Readings: Class Notes #4; Buttrick, Ch. 5.
* Recommended Texts: Moltmann, Ch. V (pp. 213-73); Hickman, et al., Ch. 6/I-N. Taylor, "Easter and The Great Fifty Days."

Introduction to the Season of Easter-Pentecost

The observance of Easter goes back with Pentecost to the first century. It is the oldest season of the Christian calendar associated with the Jewish calendar. Before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) agreed that Easter should always be observed on a Sunday, the date varied from region to region. It was celebrated during the week of the Jewish Passover (from 14th to 16th of Nisan) to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus, either on the actual *pascha* day (14th of Nisan) or the following Sunday. Later, the early Christians celebrated Easter for fifty days, from the Jewish day of Passover to the fiftieth day of the Jewish Pentecost. It was an unbroken period of rejoicing over the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the community in preparation for the day of the Lord, the *parousia* (Acts 2:9-11; Joel 2:28-32). As a result, in our Church calendar and lectionary, the celebration of Easter is not merely a one-day festival but continues for fifty days, from Easter Day to the Day of Pentecost. That is, the seven Sundays following Easter are called the Sundays **of** Easter (First Sunday of Easter, Second Sunday of Easter, etc.) rather than the Sundays after Easter.

The Christian faith began with the Easter message. According to Mark, three women who loved Jesus visited his tomb early in the morning, found it empty, saw the risen Christ, and informed his disciples of the empty tomb. Their witness became the foundation of Christianity and the season of Easter-Pentecost is the core of the Christian year and lectionary. The liturgical colors of white and gold were used for the joyous Easter season, while flame-red was used for the day of Pentecost.[[1]](#footnote-1) By deepening our understanding of the resurrection of Christ Jesus, we can develop a more profound theological meaning of doctrines and theological themes related to other seasons of the Christian year, for other liturgical seasons, such as Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and Lent, should be reflected upon in light of the Easter message.

When we prepare our yearly Easter sermon, we realize that it is not easy to interpret the resurrection narrative in a way that will appeal to the contemporary listener's modern mindset. A young Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived according to the will of God in Judea in the early first century, was crucified and killed because of his prophetic ministry against the existent authorities--social, political, and religious. However, some of his followers testified that they met him again three days after his death. According to their witnesses, he was raised from the dead as he promised before he died. Before ascending into heaven, the risen Christ promised his people that he would continue to be with them in the form of the Holy Spirit until his return to judge the world.

Indeed, this resurrection narrative is a mystery beyond our rational understanding. Although Christianity was born from the witness to the risen Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most difficult Christological events for us to understand and preach. What kind of sermons have you heard at Easter in your church? How was the mystery of Easter unfolded in these sermons? Have you ever preached an Easter sermon? If yes, how did you interpret the mystery of Easter in your sermon?

Discussion about Faith in the Resurrection

**"TRUTH, FACTS AND THE EMPTY TOMB:** Metaphor and story weave truths with facts. The timeless truth of the Gospel is resilience--that Love bounces back. Your lived experience of resilience can absorb the wildest scholarly guesses about the facts of Jesus' empty tomb. Facts will be disputed but truth is validated in your experience." -Kent Ira Groff © Adapted from *What Would I Believe If I Didn't Believe Anything?* Permission is granted to use with proper citation.

Moltmann summarizes various theological views on the resurrection of Jesus into four—the traditional, the existential, the revelatory, and the eschatological:

1. **The Traditional View:** Easter is celebrated by sharing Easter eggs in many churches. This custom started among the early Christians of Mesopotamia, spread into Europe, and was officially adopted by the medieval church. As a result, many preachers use the symbol of an egg to illustrate the rebirth of life. Here, faith in the resurrection is understood either as belief in the immortality of the soul (or the life after death) or as a born-again faith coming from believing in the name of Jesus Christ as the Savior. This understanding became the traditional view of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and has prevailed among ordinary Christians as the meaning of Easter. In addition, it is noteworthy that some preachers strive to prove that Jesus' resurrection was a historical event in the Judaic country two thousand years ago and stress that belief in this fact is the core of the Christian faith.

Since the Enlightenment, however, the development of historical criticism in biblical scholarship has challenged this traditional view on the resurrection. It has encouraged theologians and preachers to think about the meaning of the resurrection differently. According to modern biblical scholars, such as Julius Wellhausen, Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Weiss, etc., Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, the popular worldview of the first-century Jewish culture, greatly influenced the formation of the Christian gospel. For example, Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God and the judgment of the last day were based on Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. The Apostle Paul's theology is also grounded on apocalyptic concepts, such as the struggle between the powers of good and evil and the anticipation of a universal reign of the one true God. Most of all, modern biblical scholars convince us that the four descriptions of Jesus' resurrection in the Gospels are the most vivid examples of the influence of the Jewish apocalyptic worldview.

While this historical criticism helps us understand the background of the biblical texts, it raises some serious theological questions about the relevance of the Christian faith: If the resurrection narrative is an example of ancient Jewish apocalyptic expression, does it still have meaning for us, who no longer live with a first-century worldview, or do we need to discard it? If the resurrection narrative is still relevant to contemporary readers, what sense? How can faith in the resurrection, which is the essence of the Christian faith, be convincingly maintained through preaching? How can the preacher claim that their sermon, preached from the lectionary texts of the Easter season, is the Word of God for contemporary listeners?

About these theological and homiletical questions, three contemporary theologians—Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Jürgen Moltmann—propose three different theological interpretations. While they all believe that the Christian gospel is eschatological, their interpretations of eschatology are different. Therefore, it is worth reviewing their different approaches to deepen our understanding of faith in the resurrection.

1. **Bultmann's Existential View:** The New Testament theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, regarded Jewish apocalyptic expressions in the Bible as a negative inheritance that Christians took over from the Jews. The only way to derive meaning from the apocalyptic texts is to "demythologize" them. When the symbolic and mythological language of the apocalyptic expressions are removed, what remains is a human existential quest. In other words, for Bultmann, the episodes of the empty tomb and the promise of Jesus' Second Coming are apocalyptic expressions that should be disregarded. He regards only Jesus' first coming as having historical meaning, so that Christ's cross is the climax of God's redemptive acts, in that it is a symbol of reconciliation with the world. The Easter narrative is a description, not of an act of God in the dead body of Jesus, but of an existential happening in the disciples, from which their faith emerged. The statement "Jesus was raised from the dead and became Christ" is, therefore, a confession of personal experience of faith (*kerygma*) of the one who decides "now" to live as a Christian by imitating the life of Jesus. The resurrection thus has meaning as the specific moment or "eschatological now" of a personal decision between life and death. As a former student of Martin Heidegger, Bultmann understands faith in the resurrection as a "present" eschatological call to an existential decision "here and now," accompanied by a sense of urgency to live each moment of one's life decisively as a Christian.

While Bultmann's existential interpretation seems to appropriately associate the past event of Jesus' resurrection with our contemporary faith experience, his view limits the Christian faith to the personal dimension ignoring the social and cosmic dimension of God's promise in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1. **Barth's Transcendental View:** Like Bultmann, Barth realizes the significant influence of the Jewish apocalyptic on the Christian gospel. Unlike Bultmann, however, he takes these eschatological expressions seriously and does not discard them entirely in reinterpreting the resurrection narrative. For Barth, the apocalyptic concept of the eschaton is the transcendental boundary of time and eternity. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is itself God's self-revelation to the world as the Lord, transcending time limits. By raising Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated Lordship to the world, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of the revelation of God. For Barth, it is not a one-time past event but has meaning as the "eternal present" of God.

While Barth's transcendental interpretation of Jesus' resurrection as God's self-revelation emphasizes the sovereignty of God, his view subordinates human history to God's divine history. As a result, faith in the resurrection means total dependence on the divine power.

1. **Moltmann's Proleptic Eschatological View:** Moltmann rejects the traditional view of faith in the resurrection. He argues that the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact, for it is realistically and historically impossible to prove it. Moreover, faith in the resurrection does not mean a belief in "life after death" because such a view of the transmigration of souls drives people to give up all their hopes in this world (fatalism). Moltmann also criticizes that Barth "dehistoricizes" the resurrection narrative while Bultmann "demythologizes" it.

Like Bultmann and Barth, Moltmann understands the resurrection of Jesus as an apocalyptic event. He nevertheless emphasizes that the meaning of salvation implied in the resurrection of Jesus should be interpreted, neither through the present-centered personal existential category of Bultmann nor through Barth's category of the divine revelation of the eternal presence. For Moltmann, Jesus' resurrection is instead a "proleptically eschatological event." That is, Jesus' rising from the dead is an act on God's part and has future historical meaning. It is the beginning of the new creation of the world, which awaits its consummation in the future ("already/not yet"). In this proleptic sense, the resurrection of Christ is told in the present perfect verb tense, "Jesus **has risen**!" The present perfect tense used in the rising of Christ is linked with the present tense of the indwelling of the Spirit, and the present tense of the Spirit is linked with the future tense of the resurrection of the dead (241). Likewise, the resurrection of Christ is the foundation and promise of life in the midst of death and is associated with an eschatological hope: "At the end of time all the dead will be raised together and suddenly 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet'" (I Cor. 15:52) (241).

Moltmann understands that when the witnesses in the New Testament reported that they had seen the risen Jesus who had died on the cross, their testimonies were based on visionary experiences. What they said, Moltmann stresses, is not that Jesus returned to this life, but that he was alive in the glory of God and appeared to them in their earthly lives (216). In other words, what they saw was associated with ecstatic experiences of the Spirit. More precisely, their experience of the risen Christ was the experience of God's Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ. Paul, therefore, calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit (or "Power") of the resurrection, and Luke tells of the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost right after the ascension of Christ.

Moltmann explains that the early Christians saw the risen Christ in the Holy Spirit in three dimensions. The first dimension was "prospective." They saw the crucified Christ in the risen Christ as one living in the splendor cast ahead by the coming glory of God. In this way, Jesus' resurrection was the eschatological endorsement of the anticipation of the Kingdom of God. The second dimension was retrospective. They recognized the risen Christ from the marks of the nails and in the breaking of bread. The risen Christ was the one who had a fellowship with them on the earth and was crucified on Golgotha. The last dimension was reflexive. In this dimension, they perceived their own call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. According to Moltmann, Jesus' rising from the dead as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Cor. 15:20) opened a new era in human history and continues to invite people to discipleship.

In Moltmann's proleptic eschatological perspective, "[n]ew creation is beginning in Christ in the very midst of this world of violence and death" (221), and "believing in Christ's resurrection means being possessed by the life-giving Spirit and participating in the powers of the age to come" (219). Therefore, states Moltmann, having faith in the resurrection means living "a life of new creation in the midst of the shadows of the transient world" with hope in God's promise (227).

Even though Moltmann dissociates his perspective from Bultmann and Barth, their positions are essentially integrated into his view: "The raising of Christ from the dead is 'the fact that changes everything' and is therefore in itself the revelation of God. As the 'One who changes everything,' God is the creator of the world that is new [this is Barth's view]. . . . The resurrection happens everyday. We experience resurrection by being born again to a living hope through love, in which we already, here and now, wake from death to life [this is Bultmann's view] (II Cor. 3:17)" (242). The only, but highly significant difference between Moltmann and Barth and Bultmann is that Moltmann's proleptic eschatological view of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is anchored in the future promise of God, the source of Christian hope.

Homiletical Implications

Moltmann's proleptic eschatological view interprets the Easter message as the joyful announcement of "a rising up in the power of life," personally, socially, and cosmically. This perspective offers the following insights for preaching:

1. Preaching the resurrection of Jesus Christ is essentially a message of hope amid our hopeless reality. Our hope comes from God's promise of the consummation of the sovereignty of God in Christ in the coming future. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the source of our hope as the foretaste of God's future promise. Therefore, the Easter sermon should begin with the sure faith that God is present in our lives in and through the Spirit and is at work to fulfill God's promise for the restoration of creation. The movie "Heaven and Earth" illustrates hope in our miserable, hopeless reality.
2. Preaching the resurrection of Jesus needs to be visionary. The eschatological hope expressed in Jesus' resurrection is, in fact, a vision for the new world, which is totally different from our present world. Visionary preaching requires imagination from preachers, enabling them to envision our future in its personal, social, and cosmic dimensions. In order to imagine a new world, the preacher needs to be able to analyze our old world critically.
3. Easter sermons are to be community-centered. The lectionary texts for the Sundays of Easter continuously proclaim the resurrection of Jesus from the four Gospels and Acts. The Sundays of Easter have readings from Acts instead of from the Hebrew Bible because the Easter-Pentecost season focuses on the character formation of the Christian community. The church described in Acts was the sign of the kingdom (kin-dom) of God, and is the model for today's church. The church is intended to be the center of the most intense struggle for the kingdom of God on earth. Therefore, the real church is the community in which people experience the movement of the Holy Spirit—inclusive, egalitarian, striving for justice, empowering the powerless, and being filled with love, joy, generosity, and sharing.

How about our churches? Our experiences with Christian churches may not be so different from those of Martin Luther King Jr. of more than half a century ago: "11 o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week," both racially and socially and economically. In this reality, Christian churches, as the post-resurrection community, are called to engage in a mission in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to create the new world.

1. Refer to Hyuk Seonwoo’s criticism of these colors in his article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)